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A raft of hope: Navigating the media and political spin

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I've almost given up watching the news. Between the banality of political jockeying and the brutality of a world in crisis, I began to wonder what purpose my nightly dose of bleakness served. Instead, I stay in touch with the world beyond work and community through selected online updates, with fewer stories but deeper analyses. It's books, however, that remain my touchstones for making sense of what's happening in the world.

As I pen these words, I'm sitting on the floor, surrounded by small stacks of books. I've returned from the university alumni book extravaganza with a box crammed full of this precious cargo. A recycling smorgasbord was on offer, with an appetizing range to satisfy all tastes: from popular novels and magazines, to art, history, philosophy, economics and science. In a cavernous room, tables were tightly packed with donated books, empty spaces hurriedly refilled from full boxes stored under each table. It was a bibliophile's banquet.

Obviously I can't read the contents of the box all at once, so I'm browsing. It's a leisurely activity – more spot reading than speed reading. I've gathered an eclectic mix of fiction and non-fiction, short stories and monographs. Reading at random openings or following interesting chapter titles is an intriguing process. It's not real reading of course, it's akin to wine tasting – some ideas hit the spot. There's often a link in a book – an idea, an image or a fact – that throws light on a problem I'm pondering. Browsing in this way is like diving into a river; I'm immersed in ideas. They wash with through my brain. Sometimes, I'm drowning in words.

Wallace Stegner's incomparable novel, *Crossing to Safety*, sits on top. I've read his meditation on what it means to live a good life, but bought my own copy to savour his perceptive prose once more. I've found a copy of Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* to replace my battered one to re-read before seeing the film. There are several non-fictions. Two of them grab my attention because of their calls for urgent action to deal with threats to our society and our planet: Tim Flannery's [Here on Earth](#) and Brendan Gleeson's [Lifeboat Cities](#). To prosper, the authors maintain, we need to collaborate with each other and with the natural world, using intelligence and technological skills to develop creative solutions. We need to take a long term view, so difficult in an era of short term politics, to design resilient systems and environments which are sustaining as well as sustainable. Both authors offer tangible and practical visions of a future beyond mindless growth. Both close their broad analyses of current social, economic and environmental problems, with a call for hope, fuelled by imagination and goodwill.

There's a [Griffith Review](#) atop another stack – always a joy to read. This one is the 2009 fiction issue, highlighting the place of story in envisaging the future. Kate Grenville describes the responsibility of the writer in times of change – why writing matters. Carmel Bird stresses the vital role of imagination for humanity to explore what might be possible. But it's in the final essay of the last book I hold, *Best Australian Essays 2006*, that I find a gem that encapsulates a feeling that has steadily grown as I read; a feeling born in frustration with the negativity of the current political and media climate. The incomparable Raimond Gaita, the Montaigne of Australia, writes about [Justice and Hope](#). He asks, how is it possible to sustain hope in a world where terrible things happen? Whereas despair might be the logical response, despair smothers determination and constrains action. Gaita argues, carefully and succinctly, that 'only what is worthy of our love is worthy of our passionate commitment,' explaining that it is not enough to love principles of justice, such as ethics, equity and empathy. To sustain a commitment and capacity to act towards such ends, we need to actively nourish love for the human race and our shared world; we need to remind ourselves of the awe and wonder that can be found alongside the misery and suffering.

Such words are not empty. Hope engages people to act together. I'm reminded of a public seminar I recently attended, organised by [One Just World](#), focused on women changing the face of global development. A panel of five feisty young women told stories of suffering and despair, recast by hope into action for change. They described education and health programs developed in their communities and the

wider world. Over one hundred people attended, more watched online. We left, buzzing with energy, full of ideas and plans for action.

Beyond the news cycle with its tedium, barbarity and despair – beyond the election cycle and political spin – there are calls for hope in creating a more peaceful, equitable and sustainable world. It occurs to me, as I sit, floating in this sea of ideas. I'm not drowning in words; my book constructions are a raft, taking me to unexpected places, lifting my spirits, engaging my imagination and determination to act in the world. These books express the essence of Gaita's message; that to deal with injustice in the world and work towards equity, we need to love humanity and love our world. Change begins with hope. With hope, like Fitzgerald, we can beat on, boats against the current.

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